

## Approaching the Value and the Future of the Novel: A Book Review Article on Boxall's Scholarship

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Yili TANG

### **Approaching the Value and the Future of the Novel: A Book Review Article on Boxall's Scholarship**

In an era of unprecedented speed, our sense of time is increasingly destabilized. With the dawn of a new century and new global interconnectedness, critics have debated a perceived shift away from the postmodern paradigm, stepping into a so-called "post-theoretical" moment. The term "post-theory" is born with the discourses of "end of theory," with a discussion on the future of theory in the new millennium. Terry Eagleton, in *After Theory* (2003), bemoans the long past of the "golden age of cultural theory" (1), while scholars, like Wang Ning and Jean-Michel Rabaté, hold markedly different attitude. Wang Ning argues that "the passing of the golden era of literary and cultural theory does not mean the death of theory" (Wang 4), since theory has permeated into the study of cultural and literary experiences. In Wang's view, theory is confronted with "decentralization," and enters the process of self-reflection. Theory, for Rabaté, "never stops coming back, at least under slightly different guises" (*The Future of Theory* 10), which is further elaborated in *A Reader's Guide to Contemporary Literary Theory* (Raman, Widdowson, and Brooker). It takes stock of the various emergent tendencies and debates, like the so-called "New Aesthetics," under the banner of post-theory (Selden, Widdowson, and Brooker, *A Reader's Guide* 273-274). In *Selection from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, Gramsci describes the era of "interregnum" of "the old that is dying," and "the new that cannot be born" (Gramsci, Hoare, and Nowell-Smith 276). The prefix "post" in post theory, in this sense, stresses the temporal continuity and engenders a much more complex relationship between the old and the new.

In the context of "post-theory," Mitchum Huehls names the contemporary works of fiction written in the wake of theory's decline "the post-theory theory novel" ("The Post-Theory" 282). Literature, a close relative to the theory, has also been troubled by its futures, ends and limits. It seems that the novel prizes open this gap in the twenty-first century, bearing witness to the old, while calling towards the illegible possibilities of the new. Not surprisingly, unease and uncertainty about the future and the value of the novel is one of the fruitful products of the "interregnum". In his 2014 article "The Novel is Dead (this time it's for real)," Will Self asserts the imminent marginalization of the novel, which can be attributed directly to the connectivity of our digital age (See Self, <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/may/02/will-self-novel-dead-literary-fiction>>).

In response to the "death of the novel," Peter Boxall explores the value of the novel to perceive of the futurity casting upon the present. This is not the first time that Boxall has embarked upon this scholarly endeavor, in his 2013 work *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (2013), he examines what makes novels essential to the way we understand our lives today, capturing a glimpse of the changing moment. Peter Boxall's researches have focused on the relationship between aesthetics and politics in modernist and contemporary writing, most recently the novel. He has established his scholarly reputation on his writings on Samuel Beckett and Don DeLillo. To name a few, *Samuel Beckett: Waiting for Godot, Endgame* (2003), *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (2009), and *Don DeLillo: The Possibility of Fiction* (2012).

In the book review article at hand, I mainly discuss Boxall's most recent work *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (2013), and *The Value of the Novel* (2015). Since we are living now at a critical time of reconsidering the collective understanding of the future, a reappraisal of the literary, political and ethical value of the novel at turning point in the history of literature, and the reflection on the future of the novel are very promising.

Against this backdrop, Boxall characterizes the twenty-first-century as "a period of unsettling tumult," and further claims that "the mechanics of narrative itself-our capacity to capture and recount events as they unfold in time and space-have undergone a transformation" (*Twenty-First-Century* 6). The premise of this argument lies in that narrative mechanics of the contemporary novel are necessarily changing in response to our time. In terms of the narrative mechanics, Boxall offers a reassessment of the capacity of narrative voice to speak to us directly and inwardly. The reason that the study of the value is preceded by the question of voice lies in that the voice of the novel might touch on the way that we receive the legacies of theory. Andrew Gibson, in his 2001 essay on voice and narrative, states directly that "there are in fact no narrative voices and no voice in literary narrative, whether the voices of authors, narrators or personae" ("And the Wind Wheezing" 640); "narrative," from his perspective, "is the tomb of speech" (643). To Gibson, the tomb of speech doesn't mean that we should accept the silence; the point is that "do we know how to attend to the muteness of narrative" (643). Boxall starts from this question, by looking at the work of Charles Dickens, particularly his novel *David Copperfield*, alongside that of Samuel Beckett, particularly his trilogy of novels. Boxall is an expert in molding his diverse materials toward a particular synthesis. Dickens and Beckett work at different moments in the history of the novel: the former is famous for its mid-Victorian realism, while the later seems to be the extension of the modernism. Despite their manifest differences, they both work in the same narrative mode, which is "homodiegetic or autodiegetic narration" (*The Value* 24). Boxall cites Monika Fludernik's assessment that "David Copperfield is a classic example of 'natural' narration, in which the narrator replicates a 'real-life schema.'" However, from realism to modernism and beyond, we realize that "the voice has always been a fantasy". Text, to Fludernik, is not "a tape recording" (*The Value* 27). Beckett adopts the particular present tense, especially in his novel *Molly*, which blurs the distinction between "here" and "there," between narrator and narrated self. When the "I-narrator" becomes empty and absent from himself, we witness the emptiness of self and of voice in the novel. One way to approach the mix of

silence and sound, of absence and presence of the novel is to attend to the voice of the parent heard in both Dickens and Beckett. The disjuncture between signs and things results from the absence of David's father, which is regarded as the legacy of his father to David. Hence the brutal arrival of his stepfather makes it difficult for him to accept. When he hears his mother singing to the new baby, the voice of his mother calls him to that earliest self and the infantine fullness of self, though this fullness is not available to him, because the death of his mother represents the death into narrative. The failure of the narrator to take full ownership of himself or the self-estrangement also exists in Beckett's *Malone Dies*. As Boxall shrewdly observes, "Beckett's narrator sets up narrative systems in order to allow them to fail, to allow them to commit a kind of suicide, which releases him from the requirement that he should speak" (*The Value* 36). The voice that makes the blindness weave into sight, silence weave into sound, non-being weave into being is the so-called novel voice. It is the quality of the voice that brings us closer than any other medium to the process of self-making mechanisms. In hearing the novel, we also hear our own voice and the process by which we make our own imaginative world, leading to the capacity to capture the changing moment.

The history of the novel, to some extent, is entwined with the history of realism. In the introduction of the *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, Boxall argues for the irruption of "new forms of realism," because of the emergence of "reality hunger" in the contemporary arts (10), given that many critics unwisely declare realism's demise. Thus, both our understanding of narrative voice and the understanding of nature of realism are now entering a transformative phase. When noting the emerging critical distaste for the postmodern conception of history, Boxall suggests that Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001) places faith in the presence of a material reality. He "tests the relationship between narrative form and a historical 'actuality'" (*Twenty-First-Century* 66), holding the belief that it is impossible to recreate accurately that reality. In the next book, he continues the exploration of realism. When doing the reappraisal of the meaning of realism, Boxall draws attention to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, which marks the birth of a new narrative form—"the narrative form in which bourgeois Western modernity comes to expression" ("Late" 3). *Crusoe* keeps a journal during his period of solitude by salvaging pen and ink from his wrecked ship. The attention to the journal is Defoe's attempt to strengthen the reality effect, despite the fluctuations in narrative perspective. However, the journal itself is put under a kind of erasure, lying in the observation that the ink begin to fail *Crusoe*. After he injects more and more water, the ink was "so pale it scarce left any Appearance of black upon the paper" (Defoe 133), which shows that, in some sense, an act of inscription is an act of erasure. Boxall has pointed out that "the invisible ink that leaves no trace is absolutely crucial to the development of prose realism in the early eighteenth century" (*The Value* 60). The meaning of realism is attributed to the struggle between the visible and the invisible, the said and the unsaid, the world and the word, which has always required us to face the risk of emptiness. This also goes for the novel, whose future lies in the "disappearing ink".

Equally illuminating is the materiality of the body in twenty-first century fiction. Boxall's conceptions of the body and the human serve to shed new light on the re-evaluation of the content of the novel. Fictional response, from his viewpoint, has explored new experiences of embodiment in an attempt to probe the category of the "human". In the book of *Twenty-First-Century Fiction*, he mainly refers to Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005) and the recent fiction of J. M. Coetzee, suggesting that "the only thing that characterizes human thought is the capacity to transcend all limits to our ability to share the being of another"(109-110). While in his next book, Boxall's emphasis is the body in the novel. To understand the value of the novel and to understand the role the novel has played in making the world and our own bodies inhabitable for us, Boxall argues that "it is necessary to attend to the capacity to say that there is a body, while saying also that there is none" (*The Value* 75). He sets up to briefly historicize and contextualize the concept of body, showing the shift in the materialist turn of body. To re-see the materiality of novel bodies and to retrace a history of the embodied fictional imagination, Boxall refers to Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) and Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* (1851), from which we observe that the relationship between discursive structures and material body is the key to rethink the body in the novel. "Our understanding of this relationship is now in a state of crisis" (*The Value* 91), while this uncertainty is also the task for the new century. To think about the body in the novel today, we are offered to erase the intersection between material embodiment and discursive forms. To Boxall, the novel is the art form that is best able to instruct us on "how information is encoded in being, how ideas relate to things, how the tendency of modernity towards virtualization and electronic disappearance relates to the destruction of our material and ecological environments" (*The Value* 91). With the benefit of hindsight, one can admire both the vision delineated by Boxall and the impressive subsequent re-evaluation of time.

In each of the two volumes, time is the central point. In writing fictions, we not only put our bodies in space, but also in time. In 2012, Boxall wrote an article, entitled "Late: Fictional Time in the Twenty-First Century," to embark on the exploration of time. He goes on to elaborate on the lateness of the late twentieth century in which critical categories are universally post-everything. The work of a wide range of "late stage" authors writing at the turn of the millennium is echoed by the feature of the "interregnum". Novelists and critics alike are all searching for a new language or in other words narrative techniques, to orientate themselves in the elusive present. The struggle of these writers to express their estrangement from their time leads to the birth of newness. This kind of newness lies in the novel's capacity of plot to refashion the experience of time. The Novel can help us to experience and negotiate time in a way, "allowing for a particular kind of embedded analysis of the texture of lived temporal experience" (*The Value* 99). To know time and to master the time, this is the gift from the novel. Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), Boxall argues, is the best example to reveal "the disjuncture between measured and unmeasured time" (*The Value* 103). The novel leads us to experience time as the characters' minds skip freely from youth to adolescence, and to middle age,

which also produces a mingling of present and past, one person and another. However, the existence of Big Ben always reminds us of the authority of measured time. To escape from the authority, Septimus chooses suicide, while Clarissa chooses to immerse herself in life and the stilled water of time. Hence, it is the time of novel that helps us to bring life freshly into being, instructing us towards the uncertain future.

As already observed above, Boxall's skillful handling of tension between absence and presence, visible and invisible, silence and sound, being and non-being, past and present, self and other, is insightful and persuasive. His arguments and elaborations are dense throughout and theoretically convincing, owing to his sophisticated marshaling of concepts. Re-evaluation and reconceptualization of novel is not an easy task. The triumph of Boxall's revision of literary and critical history that looks forward to the novel's future is based on several features that I am trying to delineate. What comes first is the contextualization. In the volumes, he offers extended readings of key novels chosen for certain contexts, like terrorism, radicalism, avant-garde, issues of sovereignty, democracy and globalization. His analysis of the material is the attempt to cross the border between textual formalism and historical contextualism. For instance, when discussing the novel voice, he adopts the traditional textual analytical tools, simultaneously historicizes and contextualizes the concept of voice in a broad range of cultural contexts. Ansgar Nünning regards narratives as "a powerful cultural way of worldmaking in that they not only construct images of selves and others, but also serve to disseminate the norms and values that a cultural formations lives by" (Nünning 36). Boxall always explores the broader political and cultural context with which fiction is engaged. This highly successful manner in which he managed to integrate the bottom-up analysis and the top-down synthesis paves the way for literary studies and criticism. The second feature, from my perspective, is intertextuality. As mentioned before, Boxall is good at molding his diverse materials toward a particular synthesis. His judicious and wise selection of texts and theoretical source always create a simultaneous re-reading, sometimes they even reveal something new about the original material. He notes that Beckett's *Malone* is a late *Crusoe*, but also shares similarities with Dickens's *David*. He also argues that beneath the historical distinctions that operate between, say, Beckett and Dickens, or between George Eliot and Zadie Smith, one can find something like "a novel imagination, a fictional logic that binds these writers" (*The Value* 128). The last but not the least feature is comprehensiveness. On the vertical axis of time, Boxall offers a perfect integration of diachronic study and synchronic study. He charts contemporary fiction's struggle to learn from the lessons of the past. At the same time, he has also conducted the study from a synchronic angle. In addressing the novel *David Copperfield* (1850), Boxall lists several contemporary novels, like *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), *Madam Bovary* (1850), *Cranford* (1851), *Moby Dick* (1851), *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), to highlight the new heights of the capacity of the novel to depict and fashion a world. On the horizontal axis of space, global thinking is Boxall's critical strength. He observes that "our relationship to the future is inseparable from the emergence of kind of global thinking, of a new conception of the relationship between our local environments and the planet as whole, the global totality" (*Twenty-First-Century* 216). He writes a chapter about the globalization, and also stresses its significance in other chapters. When referring to time, he suggests that we not only need to "retune our relationship with the time of our transformed culture, but with the time of the planet" (*The Value* 114), which is thoughtful and provocative. Throughout the extended close readings of texts across time and space, from modernism to the so-called "post-postmodernism," from European writers to Japanese English writers and African writers, Boxall yields insights considered vital for the study of novel and its value and future.

Putting it in a nutshell, as Boxall said in his interview, "novel is the place where we understand the changes of the world. It is also the machine to build our mutable future" (See "Interview with Peter Boxall," <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hf01JsfwcdA>>). He observes that the future of the novel is the mingling of utopian and dystopian with rich unknown possibilities. In response to the pessimistic attitudes in the circles of literary criticism, Boxall's confidence about the vitality of novel is justified in this "post-theoretical" moment, which also resonates with many other scholars and writers. For instance, in Caren Irr's *Toward the Geopolitical Novel* (2014), she conveys the sense that the open-ended contemporary novel is trying to find an expression of the new and the future. After examining over a hundred recent American fictions, Irr claims that the twenty-first-century geopolitical novel "presents detailed descriptions of ordinary, dedicated people wrestling with the problems of the new millennium" and, in the process, reveals "some key features of contemporary political experience" (3). Boxall's argument also makes clear Pieter Vermeulen's insistence on "the strategy which contemporary fiction rethinks the ethics and politics of literary form as it grapples with new modes of life and affect" (Vermeulen 12). When approaching 21st-century British fiction, Shang Biwu also avers that "British fiction did not meet its end but flourished in the first decade of the 21st century, demonstrating its innovation through intersection in both narrative forms and thematic concerns" (Shang 133). In terms of the novelists, Julian Barnes might be the representative who expresses his overt rejection of the idea of the demise of the novel by his celebration of diversity (See "Robert Birnbaum Interviews Julian Barnes," <<http://www.julianbarnes.com/resources/archive/birnbaum.html>>).

It is noteworthy that the heart of the debate about the death of the novel is its productivity, innovation and cultural power. The features of the "interregnum" make people question the novel's famous elasticity and capaciousness. However, if novel is dead, then it will be reduced to the ghost that lingers on the literary castles and keeps the business of engaging, formulating, and shaping the world. It will still assert its value of variability and adaptability by drawing interiority and the society into the same fictional universe. Though Boxall's map of the novel is inevitably limited to its subject and analysis, for instance, the subtle difference of cultural and historical condition between British and

American novels is, to some extent, neglected; his evidential use of novel and sophisticated manipulation of concepts still prove the novel's capacity for "darkly lighting our way".

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